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Network Coverage of Presidential Speeches

ONE of the most powerful tools at a President's fingertips is the ability to commandeer free television and radio time on all the major networks at once, at whatever hour he may choose. This extraordinary access to the people can be extremely important in its purest forms, of course—say, to announce a national emergency or to explain provisions of a new policy. But there is a built-in imbalance in this practice, for the proper willingness of networks to cover news can be exploited by a President to present a prime-time, political commercial for his administration, with no comparable format existing to air contrasting views.

Presidents from both political parties have taken advantage of this television tilt, pre-empting all regular network programs to deliver carefully scripted, unchallenged White House arguments, each packaged as "a major presidential address." Correcting this imbalance is a difficult problem for the networks. But if presidential speeches are to be considered top-priority news, those who cover and present the news for radio and television should go to great lengths to put a President's statements into context for the same public that has listened to him.

For some time now, the Columbia Broadcasting System has been agonizing over the problems of handling presidential speeches. In June, the network announced a new policy of providing free air time for the presentation of contrasting views. The idea was that after every presidential television or radio speech "on matters of major policy concerning which there is significant national disagreement," free time would be made available to holders of opposing views—generally within a week after the President speaks.

But CBS accompanied this attempt for more serious dialogue on national issues with an unfortunate decision to ban all news analyses by correspondents immediately following presidential appearances. As we noted then, these post-speech roundups were not always well done, informative or essential for public

understanding of a presidential address; but knowledgeable reporters can—and should—be in a position to provide additional pertinent information and useful insight for all who care to stay tuned.

This month, CBS conceded the point, and dropped the ban. William S. Paley, CBS board chairman, noted that "since June 6, the nation and the world have witnessed a rapid series of exceptionally newsworthy events. This has made it clear that postponing news analysis under all circumstances may impair a journalistic service of far greater value to the public than we had realized." From now on, said Mr. Paley, CBS will provide analysis when, "in its news judgment, such service seems desirable and adequate preparation is feasible."

This action is not only welcome from a journalistic standpoint, but it is especially important to the public—which, according to the White House, will be seeing and hearing President Nixon more frequently as he moves to solicit support from the American people. Moreover, the other networks would serve the public better by joining CBS in its attempt to air responses by holders of differing views. While it is not always easy to assemble people on quick notice for rebuttals—a problem CBS says it has encountered already—a serious effort ought to produce members of the opposition party or other citizens of sufficient stature to address the television and radio audience in the free-time format used by the President (including similar advance public notices of their broadcasts).

Obviously, these efforts do not offset entirely the advantage of a President in drawing national attention to the administration's point of view; by virtue of his office alone, the President is likely to win better ratings. But as attempts to open direct access to the public, and to help the listeners weigh what is said without judging it for them, the CBS initiatives constitute a sensitive and sensible improvement in broadcasting's approach to coverage of the President.